YOUTH AND GAMBLING: SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?

Bruce Ballon, Gary Hoskins and Colleen Tessier | Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Today’s youth are gambling. A study published in 2007 by the Responsible Gambling Council (RGC) reported that approximately 40% of survey participants who were Ontario youth 15 to 17 years of age reported gambling, both formally and informally, at least once in their lifetime. The average age when they reported first gambling was approximately 13 years of age.¹

Youth today are the first generation to be inundated with glamorized portrayals of the benefits and fun of gambling. They see it everywhere - television, the internet and poker parties! The expansion of legalized gambling as well as an acceptance by the public of gambling as a popular form of entertainment has contributed to the involvement of youth in this activity.

Gambling prevention programs should be part of any comprehensive school health program.

Prevalence Rates

Children often start gambling with family members, especially parents and grandparents. They may often purchase lottery tickets with parents, play cards and bingo for money with relatives, or receive lottery and scratch tickets as presents. With an increase in youth gambling comes an increase in the number of young people who are experiencing problems with gambling.

The same RGC 2007 study reported:

- Betting on a dare or challenge that they (58.9%) or someone else (48.4%) could do was the most common gambling activity among 15-year-olds;
- Following suit, the majority of 16-year-olds bet on a dare or challenge that they (56.1%) or someone else (43.5%) could do. Playing poker for money (42.1%) come in close third place; and
- Seventeen-year-olds were more likely to report playing poker for money (47.8%) and buying raffle tickets (41.8%).

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) 2005 Ontario Student Drug Use Survey (OSDUS) Mental Health and Well-Being Report had these findings:

- Among all students, 6% gambled at 5 or more of the 10 activities asked about. This group can be considered to be heavy gamblers;
- Males were more likely to report heavy gambling than females (9% vs. 3%); and
- Overall 4.5% may have had a gambling problem. This represented about 45,800 Ontario students.

Gambling Activities During the Past 12 Months 2001-2005 (Grades 7 to 12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>All Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cards</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lottery Tickets</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Pools</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Gambling</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with substance use, many young people have been involved in some form of gambling. As with substance use, some will experience problems in their lives as a result of their gambling.

Risk and Protective Factors

There are a number of risk factors that may raise the possibility of a youth developing problem gambling behaviours:

- Having first degree relatives with problem gambling or other addictive behaviours;
- Having a family and/or cultural atmosphere that endorses gambling as a regular behaviour;
- Being with peers who engage in gambling (e.g. Texas Hold-Em, craps, etc.);
- Declaring their role-models to be celebrity gamblers;
- Early childhood difficulties/biological substrates (e.g. the slow-to-sooth, learning difficulties);
- Trauma effects (e.g. physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse);
- Many psychiatric disorders (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Depressive Disorders, Anxiety Disorders, Impulse Control Disorders, Psychotic Disorders, Substance Use Disorders); and

¹ Teen Gambling in Ontario: Behaviours and Perceptions Among 15 to 17 Year Olds. White, Monica A. PhD; Mun, Phil PhD; Kauffman, Nadine MA; Whelan, Christina MSc; Regan, Matthew MSW. Responsible Gambling Council. Jan. 24, 2007
Various social factors (lack of engagement in healthy extra-curricular activities such as physical exercise, art, etc.; isolated at home on the internet etc.).

Many of these risk factors are not just for problem gambling but other addictive and maladaptive coping strategies that youth can develop in response to underlying difficulties. The combination of vulnerability due to mental health and social factors and access to gambling can result in a youth developing problem gambling behaviours.

Important protective factors involve addressing these issues through the following:

- Education on the dangers of gambling at school and from parents;
- Knowing about family members with gambling problems who have been helped by the family working together;
- Encouraging healthy relationships;
- Parents having a strong stance against their children engaging in gambling behaviours;
- Keeping in touch with the inner world of a youth, e.g., favourite past-times, role models;
- Helping a youth develop healthy coping and soothing strategies for stress; and
- Dealing concurrently with any underlying or active mental health or social stress concerns.

By understanding the nature of gambling and its links to many psychiatric, psychological and social concurrent issues, parents, teachers and health care providers become a credible and supportive source of education and help for youth. Being able to identify and know risk factors so that a youth can be given appropriate support is important. Treating an underlying psychiatric disorder may decrease the chance of a youth turning to gambling as a maladaptive technique.

It is important to remember that any one or more of these examples may be an indicator of a gambling problem but does not absolutely indicate that the youth has a gambling problem. The behaviour should be viewed as a red flag that may warrant taking a closer look and possibly gently discussing the subject with the individual student. Bear in mind that gambling is a normalized activity for many youth and an over-reaction on the part of a caring adult or teacher may only push the student further away.

Problem gambling has the potential to undermine a youth's life in much the same way that substance abuse can. Negative consequences commonly associated with problem gambling include financial problems, strained or lost relationships, poor performance at school or work, criminal behavior, preoccupation with gambling, depression, anxiety and overall lack of progress towards goals.

Concurrent Disorders

Problem gambling is often identified when a youth is having a decline in function. This may be demonstrated through exhibiting difficulties with mood, handling stress, and controlling their actions. It is important to consider problem gambling as a red flag for the possibility that concurrent mental health and other problems are present.

It is important to realize that concurrent disorders are more “combined” then just “concurrent”; that is, they are influencing each other. For example, if youth develop a major depressive episode, they may turn to problem gambling and eventually develop pathological gambling. This in turns worsens the depression that drives even more gambling behaviors. On the other hand, the gambling may have occurred first, causing vulnerable persons to develop the depression, which in turns again drives the gambling.

A health care provider can screen and assess to determine what is interacting with the problem gambling. Psychiatric disorders and factors that are common in the youth problem gamblers include: substance use disorders; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; depressive disorders (both unipolar and bipolar disorder); anxiety disorders (especially social anxiety disorder and post traumatic...
stressed; history of trauma; and personality disorder in formation (conduct disorder, self-cutting behaviors, etc.).

Prevention and Awareness

Many factors will shape a young person’s future decisions about gambling. Comprehensive prevention programs are effective in providing necessary skills and information to youth by placing them in a better position to make informed decisions about gambling. Prevention programs should focus on addressing risk and protective factors through community involvement, broad communication messaging, and policy development. Prevention programs should aim to increase knowledge and awareness of the risks of gambling, promote informed decision-making about gambling and increase the early identification and treatment of youth experiencing gambling problems or at risk of developing them.

The Youth Making Choices: Problem Gambling Prevention Program is a curriculum based prevention program for students in grades 8 through 12. The package includes: Educators Guide – Problem Gambling Prevention; Math Curriculum grades 8 and 12; Family Studies Curriculum grades 9 to 12; Heath and Physical Education curriculum grades 9 to 12; and a DVD.

The Educators Guide – Problem Gambling Prevention provides additional support material for teachers to facilitate the delivery of the lesson plans. The lesson plans fit well with the expectations of several intermediate and senior level courses in mathematics, family studies, health and physical education, social sciences and the humanities. The DVD is for use with the lesson plans but can also be used independently by students. It engages students in interactive learning experiences about problem gambling and strategies for effective coping.

The program objectives are to: enhance students’ coping skills; develop students’ applied knowledge about randomness and probability; and improve students’ recognition and avoidance of problematic behaviour.

Resources

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
www.problemgambling.ca

Responsible Gambling Council
www.responsiblegambling.org

YMCA Youth Gambling program
www.ymcatoronto.org/en/youth/learning-training/gambling.html

Youth Bet
www.youthbet.net

Youth Gambling International

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